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The Turning Point in Time from the Serbian Perspective: How to Turn the Digital Tide

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Abstract: To compare and contrast two points in time the article highlights the social impact of the WWW that was still hidden in 1989 and the social impact of the disappearance of the reading of printed books that is still hidden in 2024. These global points of interest for turning the tide are supplemented by some particulars from a Serbian perspective and a question: should world governments buy time for people to read printed books?

Keywords: WWW; reading printed books; Serbia; digital technologies; subsidies for culture; habits

Die Wende aus serbischer Perspektive: Wie wenden wir die digitale Flut?

Zusammenfassung: Um zwei Themen auf einmal zu vergleichen und zu kontrastieren, beschäftigt sich der Artikel mit der gesellschaftlichen Bedeutung des Internet, das 1989 noch verborgen war, und mit der des Verschwindens der Lektüre gedruckter Bücher, das 2024 noch verborgen ist. Diese Aspekte, die global für die Zeitenwende wichtig sind, werden durch einige speziell aus serbischer Sicht ergänzt und führen zu der Frage: Sollten die Regierungen sich rechtzeitig darum kümmern, dass die Bevölkerung gedruckte Bücher liest?

Schlüsselwörter: Internet; Lesen gedruckter Bücher; digitale Technologien; Förderung der Kultur; Verhaltensweisen

When I was first asked to write this article by a good friend Ann Matheson, I was immediately thrilled with the idea of comparing and contrasting now – 2024 – and then – 1989, by telling the stories and perspectives of turning points that turned the times. I was initially thinking about presenting the “now” story from the usual perspective of a librarian from a South-Eastern European country with some national flavour and inevitably placing the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the centre of the “then” story. But somewhere along the path of envisioning these possibilities, a more

digitally-centred narrative occurred to me. Yes, political particularities related to specific areas are important and almost inevitable, but if one looks beyond everyday news and searches for the essentials that defined “now and then”, digital becomes the central point of the story. This means digital, as in digital technologies, but also transcending mere technological determination, and becoming symbolic for – and the basis of – a new world and the new hope that we lived “then” and dreamed of “then”, and that we repeat living and dreaming of now.

1989 was the year in which the World Wide Web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee.¹ Usually, the sentence starting to describe “then” – 1989, states that this was the year in which the Berlin Wall fell. Undoubtedly, this was an historic event of huge importance, but looking at “now”, one can begin to think that with the world divided again more than ever its long-term importance was perhaps national and not global as perceived at the time. Fukuyama’s essay “The End of History”,² as we all believed the fall of the Wall represented, seems not so realistic from the perspective of 2024 and rising global multipolarity.³ On the other hand, one thing in my opinion that will not be questioned in 2059 is the impact and the influence of the World Wide Web.

Serbia had its last one-party elections in 1989,⁴ but though they were the product of the socialist system, they were very modern from a 2024 perspective. The role of a leader who transcends ideology and imposes personality over programme or ideology might seem very familiar in many parts of the world in 2024, as well as the total domination of one party within the voting system and multiple candidates where other candidates are even more free from programme/ideology (or in 2024 terms, programme free) since they are running as independents. In such an environment, hope has been high that the end of ideology would mean the automatic end of socialism, but no one noticed that there is no automatic transition to free and true democracy. The end of ideology created a vacuum, and it was filled with new ideas, but they were not all necessarily about freedom and democracy and human rights. Instead, as we

1 Berners-Lee (1989).

2 Fukuyama (1989).

3 Peters (2023).

4 Pavković (1997).

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were among the first to find out in the former Yugoslavia, they have been mostly about populism and personal financial gain. So, in 1989, there were huge expectations related to politics and they brought positive vibes and energy, but this was not meant to last. Basically, nothing of importance happened in the ex-Yugoslavia Republics, except for Slovenia: the societies politically, and even culturally, reverted to the 1930s, and the whole era of socialism was erased as if it had never existed.

On the other hand, the great expectations that were also there in the sphere of technology had more lasting consequences. Particularly in Yugoslavia, 1989 was remembered as the year in which for the first time the idea of a public unified digital cataloguing system gained wider ground.⁵ It was invented in the late 1980s by the Institute of Information Science (IZUM) from Maribor, which still provides this service to the majority of libraries in the former countries of Yugoslavia in 2024. So, in 1989, the future was there, but it was not yet visible. Globally, the World Wide Web had been envisioned, but its true potential and impact would be visible only ten years later. Locally, both geographically and professionally in terms of Yugoslavia and librarianship, the digital catalogue was there, but it would also take about ten years for it to take off and fulfil its potential. So, in general, it was political changes that were visible to the public eye in 1989, both globally and in Yugoslavia. And there were huge expectations and energy about these changes, but ten years later these expectations and energies had fizzled out.

On the other hand, in 1989, there were also expectations and energy related to digital technologies and their future development and impact, but they were not as obvious and seemingly not that important and world-changing as those in the political arena. Everyone in Yugoslavia and in Yugoslav libraries expected that our world would change primarily because of the politics, and that digital technologies would merely add to this, speed it up and facilitate it. It turned out though that it was all the other way round. Politics brought fast and seemingly gigantic changes. Yugoslavia dissolved, socialism collapsed, and a lot of people left their homes, either because they moved to bigger towns or to other countries and continents. It turned out that it was no change of long-term significance at all. Everything just reverted to the 1930s politically. What brought real change were digital technologies. Ten years later they ushered in a high level of globalization, booming economies, social and geographical mobility, personal opportunities, etc. It is easy to say that we were all deceived by the spectacularly grandiose political things going on in 1989 and that we did not notice digital starting off. And it would be true to say

this, since the political change had been enormous, and it came after many decades of the Cold War, when the status quo was a measure of the survival of humankind. And technological changes up to that point in human development were sometimes revolutionary, but they mostly affected physical aspects of our world and were thus limited by the standards of today. In the 1989, contest between politics and technology for the greatest influence on the future, it was easy to say that politics was the winner. The political changes in 1989 meant the end of the world as we knew it. The changes were so unimaginable that no one took notice of digital technologies being born, even though this also gave rise to much hope and energy for the changes that digital would bring. We need to remember this in order to assess more correctly our situation in 2024 and to try to envision the future better than we did in 1989, at least because much more seems to be at stake today than it was in 1989.

2024 is the year in which the Wall fell. We just don't know yet which Wall it will be – the one in Chasiv Yar or in the Kremlin. But as in the Cold War, a long-term status quo is unattainable, war cannot last forever and a compromise solution seems impossible.⁶ So, the only solution is the victory of one side and whichever side it is, the consequences will be even more dramatic than those after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. It will be the end of the world as we know it. Just in the same way as it seemed to everyone in 1989. The end of history, perhaps in reverse or mirrored, depending which side wins. But will this climatic change be of significance in ten- or twenty-years' time? Or will the year 2059 be defined by the Fall of the Wall technology in the same way as the year 2024 was not defined by the political events of 1989 but by technology changes almost invisible at the time, mostly by that of one Tim Berners-Lee? Is ChatGPT our new WWW? It is anything but invisible⁷ as the WWW was in 1989. The amount of energy gathered around AI in 2024 and the amount of energy gathered around digital technologies in 1989 are similar to a degree, but visibility and expectations are now much higher.⁸ On the other hand, the Macintosh was the frontrunner of change in 1989⁹ and the WWW was all but invisible. So, what if ChatGPT is not the thing that will change the world in ten years' time, but something else that travels with us in 2024, but is still invisible, like "the Alien" in the film of the same name? Something that, like the WWW, is more about context, interactions, and human habits than mere technology.

⁵ Seljak and Seljak (2000).

⁶ Fesenko (2024).

⁷ Varghese and Chapiro (2024), Zhixiong et al. (2023).

⁸ Ferruz et al. (2024), Monteith et al. (2022).

⁹ Levy (2000).

To my mind, it may be much more proper to start a paragraph about 2024 like this: 2024 is the year in which the printed book fell out of favour with a statistically significant number of people. Or, if we are to be dramatic, as circumstances maybe require: 2024 is the year in which we as a human race stopped reading printed books and started evolving into another species. The drama of such a statement requires detailed explanation, and I will provide some detail, primarily for explanatory reasons, since this is still invisible to the same degree as the WWW was invisible thirty-five years ago. But I am convinced that this trend is with us today as the WWW was with us in 1989, and if I am right, and the consequences start showing in ten years' time, it is better for us to finally start learning from history and to describe the nascent future before it takes its full shape. What we are witnessing today is, in essence, the victory of the digital world. Things are mostly digital in 2024 – a research article is not a digital research article as it was in the 2000s and even the early 2010s – it is again just a research article: the fact that it is digital is self-evident, so the need for the adjective has been lost. And it is the same with TV,¹⁰ radio,¹¹ cars and trains, and other transport vehicles,¹² warfare,¹³ agriculture,¹⁴ documents,¹⁵ certificates,¹⁶ invoices,¹⁷ bank transactions,¹⁸ etc. The world has become digital, in spite of humanities persevering in being digital humanities (pun intended), and what apologists for digital for the last twenty to thirty years, me included, fought for has materialized. So, the only question remaining is what shall we do with our victory and what is its true meaning, the one that we may have overlooked when we rooted for it? Since we have the experience and the capital from gaining this victory, we are probably in the best position to make the proposition, especially since we also have the moral obligation to do so. The world we live in and, more importantly, the world the human race will be living in is our creation, and we should take the responsibility for that child of ours and at least pose the questions about the problems the digital world inherently brings, the questions that others are not willing or not able to pose, and, at best, make societies look for answers and implement solutions. The digital world we have created brings a lot of unquestionably positive things – most importantly, free and easy access to “stuff” and endless possibili-

ties and range of “stuff” available to us. That is all well and good, but there is an underlying problem.

The endless stream of possibilities always calls us to stop doing what we are doing and look further for a better solution.¹⁹ On the other hand, the digital world creates “Long Tail”²⁰ distributions in every aspect of work and life, making us susceptible to the influence of “influencers” (another pun intended where, honestly, no pun is decent due to the great seriousness of the issue, but since we are trying to root for humanism let's make even a clumsy attempt to save one aspect of it – humour!). The reading of printed books has been caught within these deadly scissors of accessibility and influences and is dying out. There is always something better to do (and by better, I mean something that will provide our brains with more immediate dopamine and endorphin), and someone we look up to who will recommend that “better something”. So, we keep swiping and swiping. What does it mean really? It means that we are quitting. All the time. With every swipe we make on TikTok and scroll down on (e)X (Twitter) and Instagram, and every hit on a new link on Wikipedia or a news site, and every new search for a better sounding reference title and citation, what we are basically doing is quitting. We quit and quit and quit until we finally are satisfied with a 30 second video, or a glance at a picture or a few words of text or casting our eyes on a subtitle and consuming and being consumed by the utter truth we discover in the first few sentences of a familiar opinion piece, or finding solace in a fairly new and cited reference whose title has all the right words for us. And it is sweet, but it is short, because an even sweeter thing is just one click away. And then it starts all over again. Swipe, quit, swipe, scroll.

Maybe it is the prehistoric Neanderthal, who was dormant within us for thousands of years of our evolution when we did not quit; when we persevered in ploughing the fields and waiting for seeds to grow; and when we transcribed manuscripts for months and months and when we read printed books for hours on days and weeks and years. Maybe it is this dormant hunter gatherer who is awoken by the digital call to his or her primary instincts in searching and finding. But this is in an environment that does not require the perseverance to lie in ambush for hours and follow the prey for days, but one in which, unfortunately for us, a mere click and a mere second separates the digital hunter gatherer from catching the best yet dopamine/endorphin influx into his or her brain. Sadly, it seems that most of the positives of the digital world – its vast and almost limitless horizon of choices and its endless capacity

¹⁰ Adda and Ottaviani (2005).

¹¹ Miller (2017).

¹² Lyons (2015).

¹³ Dudley et al. (2001).

¹⁴ Lajoie-O'Malley et al. (2020).

¹⁵ Van Oosterhout (2000).

¹⁶ Saramago et al. (2023).

¹⁷ Ndulu et al. (2021).

¹⁸ Tsindeliani et al. (2022).

¹⁹ Paquiénéguy (2024).

²⁰ Anderson et al. (2006).

to empower individuals – have unintentionally created a framework for the making of a species of “quitters”. The first thing the kids of today learn is not to speak but to “quit” by changing channels on the remote or by swiping. It is becoming inbred in us to quit. The same way it was bred in us to persevere, partly and also by reading printed books. And perhaps when looking at the bigger picture of individual growth and maturing, perhaps mostly by reading printed books. To be fair, there have been other things as well. Collecting items, postal stamps among other things and marvelling at their artistry, and not discarding the previous model of whatever for a shiny new one, or marvelling at artworks in general – absorbing the paintings of the Great Masters in galleries for hours on end and not running for a selfie with as many famous ones as we can catch, or listening to classical music, or enjoying other artforms that require fairly long training and study for those who wish to fully appreciate them, instead of hopping from one one-syllable, one-beat tune to another on endless recommended lists.

What we missed when we embarked upon building our digital world was a true understanding of how to build and establish democracy. In ancient Athens when democracy was first established in Cleisthenes’ times, it took decades for newly created voters to be able to truly participate and not just “copy/paste” what aristocrats did in the assembly.²¹ This was achieved by not quitting. They would sit in assembly meetings forty to fifty times a year and they persevered listening to debates they perhaps did not at first fully understand, but after a while the experience started to expand knowledge for them and finally the wisdom to be able to make better collective decisions than the individual decisions of autocrats or oligarchs.²² It seems that naively we believed that by empowering people through digital tools, we would make a shortcut to an ideal society. And that we would make their choices better if we all of a sudden provided endless choices for them. What happened instead, without the period of education and training that was crucial for building long-term sustainable democracy in ancient Athens, was a digital mess of conspiracy theories, anti-science, and fake news, which is constructing a framework for digital oligarchs to claim that democracy is inherently wicked and stupid. Just look at the Web, I mean the World, it is so clear now, and in the same manner as oligarchs undermined democracy in ancient times by calling out all the mess and the bad decisions the early democracies in ancient Greece made, due to inexperienced and untrained but newly empowered citizens.²³

It seems that the digital tide that is moving in this direction is unstoppable and that we will all drown in a digital swamp we have created. Is there anything we can do now? Our old enemies, which have been beaten, proposed twenty to thirty years ago to discard digital, erase files, ban smart phones and tablets, but most of all to never, ever read digital books, because they will melt our brains. Sadly, they were not right, in fact they were dead wrong, but as always in history, nothing is black or white. Their hunch was good: they just did not think it through. And that is why they lost and why we won. The world is irreversibly digital and the price of making things right again is now much higher than it might had been, were it not for the digital wars. If we had all focused our energies on a true understanding of the processes, we were part of it, instead of spending it all on the blind pursuit of victory for our side, smarter solutions may have been found. Policies of “Let’s make it if we can, and be quick about it, before someone asks questions” led to a quick victory, as is the case with every Blitzkrieg. But it left a battlefield full of destroyed and discarded enemy equipment that now needs to be towed away and disposed of – printed books, oil paintings, radio receivers, stamps and coins can all be disposed of, so that we can keep quitting in this new digital world of ours. Unless we, as victors, propose an alternative agenda, one in which we stop quitting all the time, but also keep all the goodies of this new digital world of ours. It is costly, but if we want to remain *Homo sapiens*, non-quitters, endurers, we need to pay a price for our costly digital wars of the last thirty years. We need to come to a collective conclusion that left to our own devices (and they are now strictly only digital devices), we will never read printed books again in numbers that are statistically significant for our future development as societies. And we will never again do other beautiful things such as listening to radio programmes, marvelling at oil paintings or collecting needless things: we will never do those things because they require time that we do not have, because there will always be something hitting us with just the right amount of dopamine or adrenaline or endorphins, so that we choose that instead of these beautiful things that do it for us only later, and we have now been trained – and young ones have only been trained – to expect and ask for them right now. And we need to come to another collective conclusion, which is that if we want to do these things again, we need to buy time for every one of us to do them.

We need intervention in the cultural sphere, in the same way that states have been intervening in the economy for the last hundred years or more.²⁴ No one would be farming today if it were not for state subsidies – so we decide we

²¹ Kagan (1991).

²² Kagan (2013a).

²³ Kagan (2013b).

²⁴ Peterson (2009).

need food and that we will pay people to keep producing it. The technical progress and societal changes related to food affected the physics of our world and was very important, and so we decided to spend money on it. Now an even more important change is looming, and we need to embrace a similar solution. How to do it organizationally and technically is a huge challenge. Financially, it is an even bigger challenge, but let's try to do it at least for those younglings under twenty, who never ever read printed books, and who have never been surprised by the realization that the night had passed, and the dawn of a new day has come while they have been reading and finishing an unforgettable book. And finally, it is most complex ideologically. How can we avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of imposing reading lists on readers for whom we are buying time to read; and what to do about the canonical question – the question about all books being/or not being of the same value? We can leave these thorny issues for later and focus on the bare idea of the necessity for defeated things like the printed book to survive in the digital world, so that we can keep developing the habits that train us in perseverance. To keep reading from printed books, along with reading from digital media, is to keep the balance between the habits of endurance and entrepreneurship. To be in training for both is to seize the opportunity and to keep developing it. To start running immediately when you see the prey, and to keep running until you catch up with it. Only with both do we stay human. And as once, thirty years ago, we saw digital as an opportunity to break chains and start running free, we need to see now that only by providing the resource of time to train, we can keep running freely. Otherwise, we will be caught again in some form of chains at one of our many stops, after many of the few metres runs, we will keep doing. The illusion of freedom that the solely digital world provides is strong and we need to see through it and realize that without perseverance the mere freedom to start running means nothing. We cannot make it to any finish line, regardless of the fact that we are free to choose it, if we always quit running after a few metres. Only in a combined digital/physical world can we continue being human, but we need to start paying for it now, otherwise we may permanently lose the aspects of the pre-digital world that do carry crucial things for us as a species. In my book, it is a price worth paying in 2024. Later it may be too late, because in 2059 there will not be enough statistically significant people alive, who remember how it was to read a printed book and what benefits it might bring.

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